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[PUBLIC MANAGEMENT RESEARCH
AND THE GAO]

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PUBLIC MANAGEMENT RESEARCH CONFERENCE

NOVEMBER 17, 1980

I am privileged to be here with you today. Improving public management has been a commitment of the GAO for many years and has received added emphasis since Mr. Staats became Comptroller General in 1966. We have been, are, and will continue in the future to be very supportive of research in this area.

Our conference theme this morning is: Meeting the ongoing challenge of developing and nurturing a public management research network. The conference objective, which supports and expands this theme, is to encourage improvements in the quality, quantity, and usefulness of public management research.

The Meaning of Research

Research, of course, is a word of many meanings to many different people. Perhaps we can think of it here today as the pursuit of information through diligent inquiry and investigation; as a careful effort to uncover new knowledge through experiment, or through other kinds of investigation. Research may employ a variety of paradigms and methodologies, but the central idea in any research is to reveal new information,

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discover new patterns, and develop new concepts in the endeavor to make sense out of our increasingly complex world. Public management research embodies all these purposes. In addition, however, it has the very explicit objective of helping us better manage our public institutions.

GAO's Interest in Research

GAO has an obvious interest in this subject. Our general objectives, as I see them, are to recommend ways of helping both proposed and ongoing federal programs achieve their goals, to assist in the process of program choice, and to make the results of our studies known before decision-points occur. This is especially important when there are strong pressures to move to new and untried approaches or to infuse more money into programs that have not yet demonstrated their worth. It is our belief that most Federal programs need to have good research underpinnings to support their implementation and execution. All of our work at the GAO touches on some area of public management, from fiscal auditing (where we have pioneered the development of federal accounting standards) to program evaluation (where we have supported and worked with such technical societies as the Evaluation Research Society in the development of guidelines and standards for the practice of evaluation).

Historically, the GAO has had a vital interest in public management research. Within the past decade, our work has evolved from a focus on financial or economy and efficiency

audits to a major concern with the actual effectiveness of Federal programs. This development of our work from audits to program evaluations has naturally led us to seek more sophisticated ways to organize, plan, and carry out our work and to find means of assuring that the results of our work are used.) The GAO's role of helping the Congress in its oversight of the Executive Branch signifies our great stake in improved public management research: The better the research in quality and relevance, and the more widely the research findings are disseminated and used, the easier it is for GAO.

We feel that public management research can improve government. The GAO utilizes, and often depends upon, the work of researchers whether they are from the social sciences, or from the physical sciences.) Our library facilities permit us ready access to a wide variety of published material. We regularly make use of that material, whether it be articles in scholarly journals or reports published by profit or non-profit research organizations.

Since the GAO is inevitably involved in assessing and making judgments on a wide range of government activities, we must look often to the research community for relevant findings and conclusions.) For example, at any given point we might be interested in questions such as: How robust is the theory underlying crime control programs? What would be the health, economic, and other effects of relaxing (or tightening) environmental standards? Or what factors influence

productivity among workers? How much? In what direction?

As GAO looks to researchers for help, however, researchers might also make greater, and better, use of GAO work. The flow in this second direction would evidently be different, but could be equally valuable. For example, some GAO reports could be useful as case studies, particularly in teaching about the practical problems of public management. In other cases, GAO may issue a series of reports concerning a particular problem area. These reports may represent a useful body of data, for further development and use by researchers, or may point to gaps in knowledge which would help build a research agenda.

GAO and Oversight

Our government is one of separation of powers in which the Legislative Branch has an oversight responsibility. It is also an open government where criticism of Executive Branch operations is aired freely in the press. In evaluating Executive Branch programs, GAO is bound to step on sensitive toes. That is unpleasant, but inevitable. We do not set out to be kind (or unkind). Rather, we attempt to be as factual, as fair, as objective, and as sound methodologically as we know how, with the understanding that the goal of oversight, like the goal of evaluation, is improved programs. We cannot direct agencies to change their practices; we can only hope to convince

the agencies or to convince those who can direct the agencies. And our power to convince is directly related to the power of our research methodology and our consequent ability to support solidly our findings and recommendations.

Our goal of improving management and program effectiveness is one which we knowingly share with others present at this conference. We do not always agree on how to achieve that goal--but sometimes we do. The principles underlying the Civil Service Reform Act is an important case in point. If implemented responsibly and effectively, that legislation will represent a major landmark in the progress of public management. But accomplishing this will depend enormously on a continuing growth in our ability to know how programs work, how to determine success, and how to identify the sources of success or failure. This reinforces still further our determination to support and undertake public management research, most particularly in the area of program evaluation.

We have recently taken steps at GAO to strengthen our own evaluation capability by creating the Institute for Program Evaluation. The Institute will assist us in the continuing effort to improve our technical skills and will serve as a nucleus for methodology development and evaluation demonstration within GAO.

Utilization of Social Research

In recent years the federal government has made a major investment in knowledge about social problems. (Public management research must draw heavily upon a base of good social science research.) A report by the National Research Council shows that in fiscal 1976 the federal government obligated \$1.8 billion to acquire, disseminate, and use knowledge about social problems. That includes obligations for both basic and applied research and other areas such as evaluation, statistical, and dissemination programs. A 1977 GAO review of social research use contained evidence that policymakers believe social research can help them. This review revealed high expectations of research usefulness by policymakers. Seventy percent of the respondents, who were top management officials in federal agencies, thought that social research findings have a substantial effect on the formulation of national policy.

(GAO's review, however, also revealed serious problems in the utilization of this research. Forty-five percent of the policymakers indicated that they were not satisfied with the translation of research results into usable products or into techniques for problem solving.) We must be aware of these types of problems, especially since the problem of utilization presents a double difficulty--not only have research findings been difficult for managers to understand and implement, the managers themselves have not made their needs, interests, and decision criteria clear to the researchers who are trying to help them.

At GAO, we believe that research is more likely to be used if planning for that use is an integral part of the research process. We also believe that effective utilization planning must involve close interaction between decisionmakers and researchers, particularly in the early stages, when the research questions are being formulated.

Public Expectations

The public expects that public managers will be fair, responsive, accountable, and honest. There is greater scrutiny of public managers and their actions today, and this is--at least in part--quite natural given the broad impact of public sector actions on the lives of almost everyone.

For reasons which can be endlessly debated, we are faced today with a public perception of governmental ineffectiveness. It is a frustrating time for those of us who have dedicated our careers--some at substantial personal sacrifice--to serving the public. But it is futile to rail against the unfairness of that perception. The task before us is to deal with the reality underlying the perception.

We must make existing programs more effective, demonstrably effective. And new programs must be designed from a base of knowledge which gives us both an assurance of effectiveness

and the ability to measure that effectiveness. The existence and use of high quality, relevant research is essential to this task.

In summary, I believe we must do two things which lie at the heart of the agenda for this conference. First, we must assure the growth of a body of public management research which is of high quality and which is relevant to the central problems of managing the public sector. Second, we must assure the continuing, thoughtful, and cumulative use of that research by public managers and policymakers.

Let me conclude by reiterating GAO's unqualified support of this conference. From a self-interested standpoint, more and better public management research will make GAO's role easier and more productive. More importantly, however, such research will help create a more effective (and hence more credible) government. And this, surely, is our ultimate objective.